

NOTES

St George's Hill Fort: excavations in 1981

In September 1981, excavations were undertaken on the Iron Age Fort at St George's Hill, Weybridge, by the Conservation and Archaeology section of the County Planning Department. These took place in advance of construction work, the proposed nature of which dictated the position and size of the trenches (fig 2). We are grateful to the developers, Berkeley Homes Limited, who not only readily gave access to the site, but also generously financed the work. Mr B N Salmon of that Company deserves particular thanks for his help in organising the work. The proposed building has, in the event, not taken place (Nov 1982).

Geology and Location (fig 1)

St George's Hill rises sharply on all sides except the north-east and attains a maximum height of 79m above sea level. The hill is almost entirely surrounded by the rivers Thames, Mole and the Wey, the only access not requiring a river crossing being the isthmus (about 1.5km wide) between the Mole and Wey.

The hill top is capped by plateau gravel, while the fairly level hinterland surrounding it has a varied geology consisting mostly of river gravels of various ages and more recent alluvial deposits. These give rise mainly to light, easily tilled soils.

Previous Work on the Hill Fort

The site has long been recognised as a stronghold by antiquarians, a good plan, for example, appearing in Manning & Bray (1804, 2, opp 581). It was traditionally regarded, in the words of the early Ordnance Survey maps, as a 'British camp occupied by Caesar before crossing the Thames at Cowey Stakes'. That tradition is, of course, baseless but it is surprising, in view of that and the likely importance of a fort so well positioned, that it has received so little attention from antiquary or archaeologist. The only substantial investigation was that carried out by Gardner (1911), who pointed out most of the major visible features of the fort (fig 1).

These may now be summarised as follows:

- A A single rampart and ditch enclosing an area of 5.5ha and following the 75m contour over much of its length. In places a low counterscarp bank is also clearly visible. Where the rampart follows the contour its presence must be assumed as there is rarely any clear evidence of an upstanding earthwork; similarly the ditch is represented only by a broad level platform (see below, and Gardner 1911, pl 2).
- B On the west side, the rampart departs from the 75m contour in order to exclude the area occupied by three spurs projecting from the main area of the summit and reaches a height of some 4m clear of ground level. In this area, the main rampart was doubled and a further rampart erected outside the ditch (see Gardner 1911, pl 1; fig 1 is taken from the modern OS map and shows the present denuded state of the ramparts). The gap in these ramparts, now occupied by Camp End Road, has been suggested as the site of an original entrance (Gardner 1911, 43). However the plan in Manning & Bray (1804, 2, opp 581), in all other respects apparently accurate, shows no gap and no road at that point.
- C On the north-east side, the rampart again departs from the 75m contour in order to exclude the large area which would otherwise be enclosed on this, the most gentle of the slopes of St George's Hill.

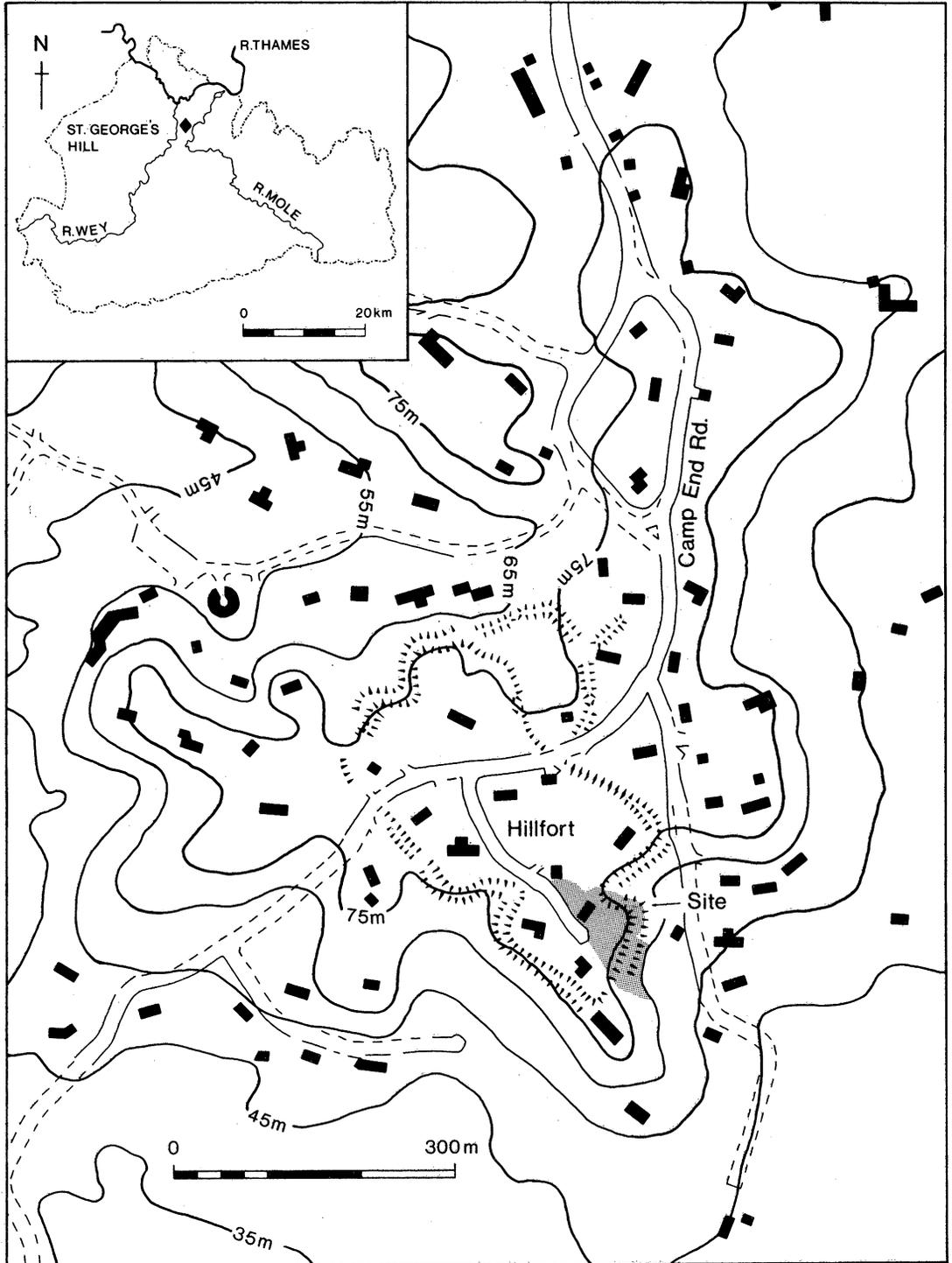


Fig 1. St George's Hill Fort, Weybridge: Location and Plan. A detailed plan of the stippled area is shown on fig 2.

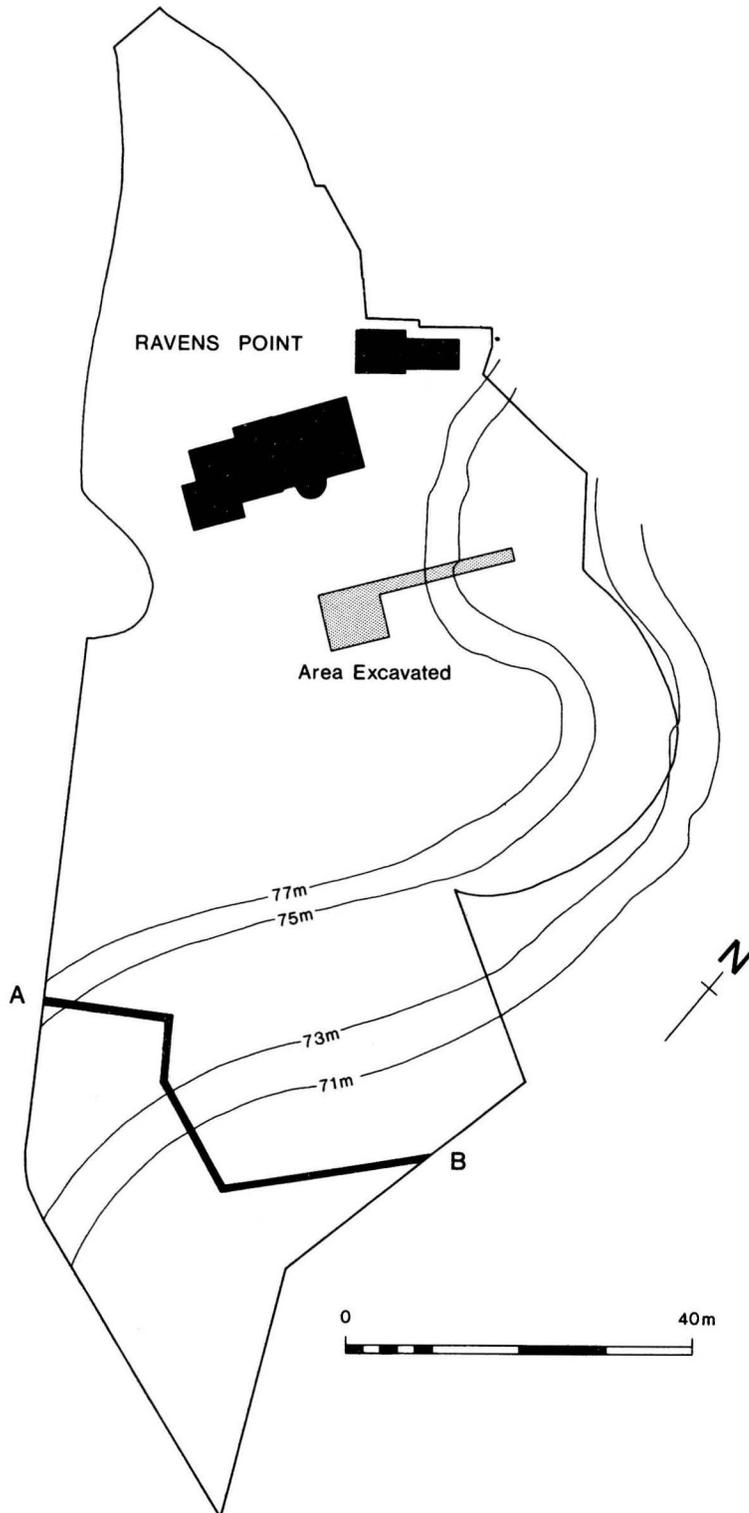


Fig 2. Location of areas excavated. A-B marks the line of a trench for an electricity cable observed by Bird (1973).

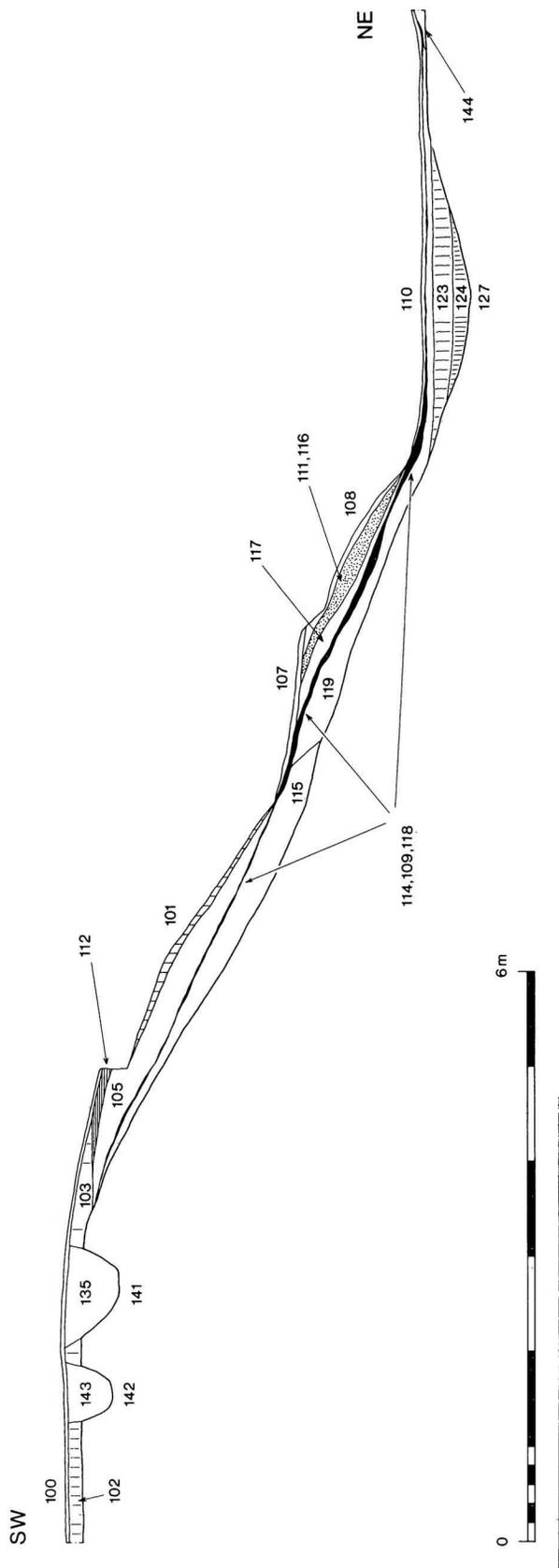


Fig 3. Section through the hillfort defences (see fig 4 for an explanation of the contexts).

D On the same side, a second 'D' shaped rampart encloses a small additional area within which a stream formerly ran. The different shape and size of this rampart from the main one suggested to Gardner that it represented a later addition, which, his excavations showed (1911, 45–6), probably originally crossed and dammed the stream to provide a protected water supply. The main rampart has a well defined gap, at a point almost central to the additional enclosure. An entrance to the enclosure would of course be necessary, but the size of this one (a gap of over 4m) suggests the possibility that it was an original and important entrance. If so, the curious banks and ditches outside the secondary enclosure (fig 1 and Gardner 1911, 46–7) may in part be explained as of defensive origin. Shortly after Gardner wrote, the process by which St George's Hill was transformed into a superior housing estate began, in spite of the strenuous efforts of the Surrey Archaeological Society to prevent it. Some pottery was discovered during the building work which then took place on the south-west side of the hillfort, but none of it was published until 1950 (Lowther 1950). Both earlier Iron Age (cf Cunliffe 1974, fig A8: no 6) and later Iron Age pottery types were present, as well as some iron slag. Lowther (1950, 144) also noted pottery of c AD 200, from St George's Hill, but c 0.75km from the hill fort. Oddly he makes no mention of two quernstones (Tomalin 1977, fig 50), recorded as from the hill, which he gave with all the pottery to Guildford Museum. The quernstones may be early Roman in date (Tomalin 1977, 84–5), in which case they could as well come from the hillfort site as from the other (assuming a third site is not involved).

The site is now a scheduled Ancient Monument, though curiously some parts of it are omitted from the scheduling order, including the area of the excavation discussed below. In theory scheduling should protect at least the clearly visible elements of the hillfort from further damage. For the most part it does so, but a recent check has revealed a number of cases of minor damage from, for example, the construction of garden steps or the encroachment of gardening; and major damage at its most southerly edge from the construction, without planning permission, of garages and a driveway levelling the ramparts.

The Excavation

The excavation work began with two aims. Firstly a trench was dug in an attempt to elucidate the sequence of construction of the defences and, secondly, part of the interior was examined for traces of occupation. A contour survey of the site (fig 2) was made before excavation began. As will be seen, the rampart in this area is almost entirely denuded, though the ditch is clearly marked as a broad level platform breaking the otherwise steep slope of the hill; a counterscarp bank is also visible in places.

THE SECTION THROUGH THE DEFENCES

A suggested sequence of events is indicated by figs 3 & 4. Four points call for further comment:

- 1 The primary rampart was placed near the top of the slope, rather than at the top. Its upper limit is marked by the point at which 109 meets natural subsoil, while its lower limit may be at the point where 115 changes to 119 (fig 3). In other words, 115 is rampart material *in situ* while 119 is collapsed material; it is not surprising that in this loose and easily eroded sand, the two were difficult to distinguish.
- 2 The secondary rampart represents a rebuilding of the defences in a similar position after a period when they had totally collapsed, and humus accumulated above their feeble remains.
- 3 The position of 103 and its relationship to 112 and 105 strongly suggest that the secondary rampart has been deliberately levelled off, possibly recently in connection with laying out the grounds when the first Ravens Point was built.
- 4 The source of the material used to build the secondary rampart is unknown, but a possible second ditch suggested by Bird (1973) should be noted (fig 2). It may also be observed that the

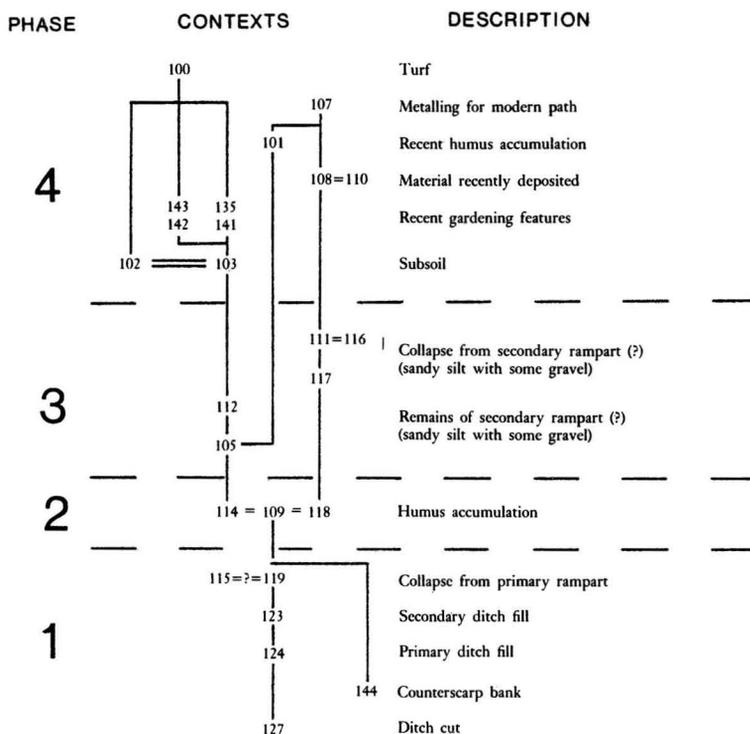


Fig 4. Harris matrix of the contexts in the section through the defences (fig 3). Detailed descriptions of the various layers are not given. For phases 2 and 4 it is irrelevant or unnecessary; for phases 1 and 3 all layers are of sandy silt with some gravel, distinguished one from the other by minor variations in colour and texture.

depth of the ditch as excavated would have been insufficient to provide all the material for the primary rampart, which probably indicates that the level platform into which the ditch was cut was artificially created and provided much of the rampart make-up.

This explanation of the stratigraphic sequence is, perhaps, coherent rather than convincing. The alternative possibility is that the rampart originally stood at the top of the slope and the excavated layers represent debris from its collapse and from deliberate landscaping of the grounds of Ravens Point. The layers are not easily explained in detail from such a standpoint and, furthermore, the similarity of the defensive features here to those of much of the rest of the hillfort ought to be significant. It may be that where such a strong defensive slope was followed the normal type of rampart was felt to be unnecessary.

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